DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 988 TE 001 839

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TITLE But Who's Minding the Store?
PUB DATE Nov 69
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Washington, D.C., November 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.65
DESCRIPTORS College Role, *Culture Lag, Educational Needs, Educational Practice, *Functional Illiteracy, Information Dissemination, *Language Instruction, Language Programs, Language Research, Language Role, *Language Usage, *Linguistic Competence, Linguistic Performance, Linguistics, Literacy, Nonstandard Dialects, Program Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

In language instruction, a dependable informational base of fact, experience, or judgment is essential if students are to develop a functional literacy. Yet the language information base in use today--the set of concepts about what language is, how it works, and how individual languages are maintained--has proven inadequate and unreliable. Reform, however, is seriously impeded because (1) formal and informal language learning occurs almost exclusively in the students' first 13 years, (2) teachers have failed to accept and understand the widely divergent dialects, (3) college English departments promote the study of literature rather than instruction in language and its uses, (4) the many strong aspects of today's movement toward a more comprehensive understanding of language cannot be easily organized for pre-college classroom use, (5) an information gap exists between language scholars and educated laymen, and (6) recent research in linguistics is of uneven quality. To remedy such culture lags, the entire language part of the English program must gradually be rebuilt, beginning with the initial teaching of reading and writing. (JB)

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But Who's Minding the Store?

For NCTE, 1969

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This discussion applies to a major problem--the extension of functional literacy to a greater percentage of the population. At a time when the ability to learn through reading and the ability to express ideas clearly in writing are increasingly necessary for the duties of citizenship, and even for economic survival, great numbers of students fall behind their peers in reading, drop out of school, or, having completed high school, are not adequately prepared to do college work. Obviously, this problem does not result from a single cause, nor will a single corrective act entirely eliminate it, but one factor is certainly among those which are crucial. One focal point is surely instruction in the language, how to read and write it on a high level of proficiency.

I shall begin by distinguishing some different senses for the term language, for these must be separated if the issues are to be properly understood. The term may refer to a linguistic system, a language, such as English or French; it may refer to linguistic competence--the command one has over the total resources in some linguistic system; or it may refer to linguistic performance--the exercise of command in some kind of linguistic activity, such as writing a class theme or reading a poem. In an expression like "the nature of language," it has an even broader reference, including all the inherent characteristics of verbal communication. And in an expression like "his language is good," it may have a narrower reference, applying only to mastery of a short list of verbal shibboleths. Traditional language instruction deals with all of these matters, directly or indirectly, but it does not properly distinguish them, nor does it properly relate them to one another.

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Any language, or linguistic system, is a general frame of reference in terms of which the members of some community may exchange verbal messages. However, in any linguistic act,

some dialect and some functional variety of this general frame provide and determine the actual surface structure forms that are employed. When we speak or write in English, we do so in the sense that the particular words and constructions that we use come from the total inventory that the total system provides. Our range of selection, however, is limited by the particular dialect, or dialects, in which we are competent. And our perception of a message is limited by the same factors. In other words, our linguistic competence in English is actually a competence in one or more of the co-existing dialects of the language, and it is generalized only to the extent that our dialectal range encompasses or overlaps the dialectal ranges of other speakers of English.

It follows that, when one attempts a linguistic performance, this performance is conditioned by the nature and extent of his competence--by the dialectal range it encompasses and the degree to which it is comprehensive within this range. Pedagogically speaking, the matter of dialectal range is especially crucial in the initial stages of learning to handle written English--to read it and to express ideas, feelings, and actions by means of it. The matter of comprehensiveness is, to a considerable extent, dependent on experience and perception. It increases as one of the components of maturity. It is enlarged and deepened as a result of verbal activity, especially as a result of wide and perceptive reading.

In this discussion, I am assuming that one of the proper functions of an educational system is to increase the linguistic competence of individuals and to improve the quality of their linguistic performances.

Underlying most of our activities, there is some informational base which guides and constrains the details of these activities. For example, a practicing physician is guided by his knowledge of human anatomy, and the development of medical remedies makes use of facts derived from the field of biochemistry. In a similar way, we must have

informational base, some set of facts about language and languages, if we are to deal systematically with the development of linguistic competence and the increase of proficiency in linguistic performance. This informational base necessarily comes from the field of linguistics. The only choice is whether to take it from current linguistic or to retain a base from a former stage of the field. It is quite irrelevant whether medical practice or linguistic performance is or is not considered to be a science or an art, provided one realizes that both involve some factual base, experience, and judgment. The issue, in both instances, is what can or cannot be taught, at least in theory, and what must be acquired from relatively unstructured experience.

Assuming a need for an informational base in language matters is not, of course, a new position. Throughout modern times, instruction in two of the three "r's" has been based on certain linguistic notions, notions which include a set of statements about sound and letter, a description of the grammatical system, and a list of proscribed usages. These imply some parts of a general theory of language--a set of concepts about what it is, how it works, and how individual languages are maintained. So far as it applies, this base is then the foundation and the source for details in most composition teaching and some literature teaching--not always overtly, sometimes only by implication. However, language scholars today know that this base, this frame of reference, is unreliable in all its major components. Its statements about the correspondences between sounds and letters, known as "rules of phonics," are not accurate for any kind of English, anywhere. Its description of the grammatical system is factually wrong and inadequate for serious purposes. Its theoretical basis has long since been disproven. There is no need to run through a catalogue of errors. These are familiar to anyone who has read the appropriate professional journals.

The reliability of this informational base is no longer even an issue. Nevertheless, it survives through a kind of inertia. My general topic is this survival--some reasons and some consequences.

A person, in his progress toward intellectual maturity, goes through several learning stages--from simple imitation, through relatively uncritical memorization, to, if he gets that far, a stage at which he tests and evaluates any new idea before he adds it to his list of trustworthy concepts. By the time he reaches this final stage, a person has usually put some notions into a kind of intellectual attic. He is emotionally attached to these notions and has long ago ceased to question them. Usually, these are relics from pre-adult stages in learning. Once in a while, someone has need for an attic-notion, so he searches for it and brings it out, much as one looks for an old box when preparing a Christmas box for mailing.

Traditionally, instruction about the language itself is concentrated in the first eight or nine years of school, during the time when most individuals are still in the stage of learning which is characterized by uncritical memorization. Some of this misinformation is repeated later, but ordinarily there is no later review and revision of language matters, such as normally takes place in the study of, say, history and literature. As a young person becomes critical and selective in what he accepts, he is not given anything more verifiable and trustworthy. The more independent or intelligent students give lip-service to the traditional doctrine in school but do not let it govern their actions outside. But, for lack of something better, one may put the material away in his intellectual attic, and he may even develop a sentimental attachment for it.

For most individuals, this is the end of it, and no real harm has been done. We all live comfortably with a few myths. But, when someone is asked to deal with or to judge instruction in language matters, he has no other informational base, no other frame of reference. If he becomes an editor or an English teacher, he has a professional need for some kind of factual base about the language, so he falls back on the only one he has. He cherishes it all the more tenaciously because it is supported only by faith, because it justifies its own myths, and, possibly, because it gives him a basis for feeling superior to others.

This situation is, of course, a canonical instance of cultural lag, of an informational gap which divides the language scholar from the educated layman. Yet, except for a few whose interests are exclusively historical or whose training is exclusively in earlier stages of the language, every responsible language scholar knows that the informational base for language matters, as taught in most schools, is unreliable in all its components--not altogether wrong, just not trustworthy. Also, every standard textbook for either the history or the structure of English assumes that the traditional language content is untrustworthy or directly attacks such parts of this content as are within its range.

However, someone whose serious reading is represented by the SATURDAY REVIEW and the NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE probably does not realize that this is the case. He does not know that the views presented in such general publications ordinarily do not reflect the views presented in professional journals by language scholars. It is easy to find evidence. The October, 1969, issue of THE READER'S DIGEST contained an article which demonstrated an extremely naive notion of how a language is maintained. Anyone who reads the NEW YORK TIMES can accumulate an impressive array of mistaken notions.

Such displays of simple ignorance are not so regrettable, however, as the publication of articles which pretend to report, but actually misrepresent, the views of language scholars. Among those guilty within the past few years are Sheridan Baker, Jacques Barzun, Mario Pei, Dwight Macdonald, and Lincoln Barnett. You may be interested in how I deal with such garbage. A few years ago, the SATURDAY REVIEW published an article called "The Dictionary as a Battlefront." It contained a series of statements which were presented as opinions held by language scholars associated with the National Council of Teachers of English. As an assignment in introductory graduate courses, I have given out copies of these statements and lists of linguists associated with the NCTE and asked the students to check the simple accuracy of Pei's statements against the published views of these linguist s. None of Pei's statements in this article is an accurate

report of these published views.

It is significant that the usage panel employed in the preparation of the AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY included all five of the men I named, and a few others with similar qualifications. But it did not include Albert H. Marckwardt, Frederic G. Cassidy, Thomas Pyles, Raven I. McDavid, Jr., or anyone else with similar qualifications. I am not making a judgment about this dictionary, just reporting the current scene.

The information gap to which I referred is not complete, for a number of persons have read articles and books written by persons with the proper qualifications. An increasing number have taken competently taught courses. The movement toward better and more comprehensive language content is now very strong, perhaps even too strong for the current state of teacher preparation and the current interests in linguistic investigation. Many are persuaded that we need changes but have not acquired enough information for sound evaluation of everything that is presented to them.

Despite its value as a general theory of language, I doubt that pure transformational grammar is a good introduction to the structural details of English. A different kind of competitor for attention, the Whorf hypothesis (vulgarized as linguistic determinism) has been flatly rejected by some linguists and is only partially accepted by the rest. Some people are trying to revive General Semantics. It has been judged as essentially unsound by linguistics, philosophers (Max Black), and other qualified critics. Part of what is presented under this rubric is valid and should be in any language program. But the valid part has been known in the appropriate fields for quite a long time. Its basic point (nominalism) is an ancient topic in philosophical controversy. Its "levels of abstraction" were differentiated by John Locke in 1690.

Other unhappy consequences of errors in the factual base are the uneven quality of research

and the unfortunate use of research findings. The Hanna report on phoneme-grapheme correspondences is a three-inch-thick volume of dangerously misleading data. It was based on an inaccurate description of the pronunciation systems in American English. It did not take into account regional differences--pronunciations which are regionally standard; and its syllabification principles were invalid for its purposes. In a different but related area, Martin Deutsch's conclusion that ghetto children are non-verbal has been disproved by research which was better designed and conducted. Finally, considerable amounts of money have been wasted on talking typewriters which were incorrectly programmed and used for the wrong purposes. See PSYCHOLINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHING OF READING, a collection of papers edited by Kenneth S. Goodman and James T. Fleming.

Now for the question which I chose as the title for these remarks. Most adults who are not teachers of English think that college English departments are the custodians of instruction in the language and its use. But most college teachers of English are interested exclusively in the study of literature. Like most educated laymen, they think that the informational base in the school program is reliable and adequate. Actually, the nearly exclusive concentration of most English departments on literature has weakened whatever language instruction there is, not only in college, but, as a consequence, in all levels below college; for the organization of our educational system makes college both the bridge and the interpreter for the flow of information downward. As one result, teachers in freshman and pre-college classes are often compelled to rely on vague memories from the eighth grade, and they are likely to select textbooks which are adjusted to the limitations of their preparation. The effect is widespread and cumulative.

As English departments have become less and less qualified to give systematic instruction in composition, they have become more and more insistent that the subject is inherently unteachable. There is just enough truth in this view for it to be inviting. The

members of these staffs have learned to read and write, often very well, without, or in spite of, the traditional content in language instruction. They use their experience as a basis for generalization, not realizing that their abilities reflect a process of selection, not a process of instruction. Furthermore, a considerable number of college teachers do not feel any responsibility for the problems of lower-level instruction. Many of them judge the quality of their teaching by the number of their students who win admission to a prestige graduate school. Many select junior staff members and teaching assistants on a basis of performance in literature classes and use publication of literary articles as a primary basis for refusing or granting tenure and promotion. The young people realize the situation.

For these reasons, one of the major impediments to improved training of pre-college teachers is the present character of most, but not all, graduate and undergraduate departments of English. Notice that there are two restrictions to this generalization. It applies only to departments which are exclusively concerned with the study of literature and only to their responsibility for content appropriate to pre-college teaching. It does not state, and is not meant to imply, that the major concern of college departments should be other than the study of literature.

Pragmatically speaking, deficiencies in the informational base for language instruction were not critical so long as the students, for a variety of cultural reasons, were largely self-educable in language matters, or lived in environments in which trustworthy observations about verbal matters could be made. Under these conditions, however, the effective roles of those handling native language instruction have usually been limited to providing motivation, an organizational framework, and other favorable circumstances in which students could learn, if they were capable of doing so. In other words, the useful contributions of the teachers have been mainly environmental rather than directly instructional.

Meanwhile, testing procedures have been used which prevent a student from advancing beyond the level at which his verbal ability breaks down. (This is called "maintaining standards.") One should realize, however, that the level of verbal ability is tested within one functional variety based on one set of dialects. Some students have learned to speak some other dialect and continue to spend most of their time in an environment in which this other dialect is the form of the language in common use. Moreover, the schools they attend do not provide reliable instruction in written English or in the dialects underlying it, nor do they provide adequate peer-group models whom the students can imitate. To a considerable extent, this unhappy situation is a pre-college problem. All that colleges can do is prepare teachers to deal with it.

At present, the over-riding challenge to the full educational establishment is the great mass of people, both black and white, who have been subject to involuntary segregation--whose schools have been separate and unequal and whose natural speech is not the dialect on which school materials are based. A very dramatic advertisement appeared recently in the NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE. A picture showed a black student, obviously in his late teens, looking at a book entitled DICK AND JANE AT THE FARM. The caption said: "See the nice book. See the big boy read the nice book. See the big boy drop out of school." The handicaps imposed by differences in cultural environments are well known, but an even greater handicap may be the fact that the version of English used in the book is likely to be just as strange to the boy as its content.

In general, attempts to change completely one dialect for another are likely to be unfruitful. Such attempts run counter to what is known about learning and about the nature of language. Of course, a few very intelligent persons manage to do so, but they are exceptional in more ways than one. Learning an additional dialect for public use has some immediate advantages, but this solution runs counter to the current and legitimate desires of many black people to retain this mark of black identity. A third course is the general acceptance of all dialects that are spoken by substantial numbers

of students, at least in the early stages of their schooling, and the mitigation of unfavorable public reaction to the use of any widely employed dialect. This, of course, would require a drastic change in attitudes now fostered by many teachers and self-appointed custodians of the language. Probably, in time, some reasonable mixture of these possibilities will prevail.

The preceding comments are not an expression of an "anything goes" attitude. They merely recognize some pedagogical realities. Activity in any socio-economic level other than the very lowest clearly requires commensurate ability to handle standard written English, whether it is sorting mail, exchanging information about an electronic device, or reading literary criticism. Our last three presidents have spoken quite different dialects, and similar differences can be found among those in any occupation, even the most learned. Differences in dialect do, however, add another factor to the educational syndrome--if I may use that term for unplanned chaos.

I am convinced that the range of opportunity in current society must be increased, and I can understand why many people feel that more open admission to colleges is necessary to this increase. However, I am afraid that open admission to colleges as they are now structured and staffed will lead to further frustration, for most college English departments are simply not prepared to cope with the particular needs of many students who will enter. In some cases, remedial work in using the language will help; but, in most instances, it will merely expose more students to the linguistic ignorance of more teaching assistants and junior staff members. And these people will still know that their professional futures are being controlled by senior professors whose primary criterion of excellence is the production of literary scholarship.

The present situation is such that no action which is feasible could produce an immediate and dramatic improvement. Some students now taking work in the language are finding that

what they are learning can be used in remedial teaching, but what teachers can use is restricted by what students can understand. In general, students whose proficiency in reading and writing is not up to college standards also lack an informational background for effective remedial teaching, even if it is available. It seems likely that the entire language part of the English program must be rebuilt, beginning with initial teaching of reading and writing, and that the benefits of this rebuilding will come only gradually, as students who have had good initial instruction in reading and writing progress through the school system.

Merely increasing the number of linguistics courses in either the graduate or undergraduate level is not likely to produce an immediate effect, even on those who take them. The remedy is not in linguistic information itself but in using this information to develop a better program for pre-college levels. Meanwhile, the language content in pre-college levels is changing, and before many years an average high school graduate will know considerably more about the language than is known by most of those now teaching in college.

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